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Chickens at the Royal Adelaide Show. *Source:* The Advertiser

SOUTH Australian poultry farmers fear a new poultry virus, similar to strains found in China, may have a devastating impact on their flocks.

The avian paramyxovirus has spread to Australia for the first time, destroying entire pigeon flocks and worrying poultry farmers about the implications for their birds.

Authorities have already urged pigeon fanciers to ground their pigeons to help prevent the spread of the virus.

Biosecurity SA chief veterinary officer Rob Rahaley yesterday inspected about 500 pigeons - all from South Australia - at the Royal Adelaide Show and passed them fit.

Dr Rahaley said the avian paramyxovirus is similar to the devastating Newcastle disease in poultry and is previously unreported in Australia.

It has killed 80-90 per cent of pigeons in six flocks of both racing and show pigeons in the Shepparton district in north-western Victoria and Melbourne. The virus has led to a warning to SA pigeon owners to keep their birds at home and restrict any movement of them in or out of the state.

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Dr Rahaley said while there had been no reports of the virus in South Australian birds, the death of pigeons in north-western Melbourne and Shepparton posed the potential for the virus to be transmitted here.

"We're strongly advising pigeon fanciers to stop any movement of their birds in connection with their hobby until further notice," Dr Rahaley said.

"As virulent paramyxoviruses isolated from pigeons are capable of infecting poultry, we're also advising producers to prevent any contact between poultry, turkeys, emus and ostriches, with wild birds or pigeons, both indirectly and directly, for example via feed and water.

Biosecurity SA will be monitoring the situation in Victoria and will investigate any reports we receive in South Australia of birds becoming ill."

Dr Rahaley said most commercial poultry flocks were vaccinated against Newcastle disease and it would probably provide some safeguard.

"The major implication is to try and limit its spread within the pigeon population and make sure that it doesn't cross into commercial poultry," he said.

Bird owners who notice any unusual signs should contact the Animal Disease Watch hotline on .

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